

POLICY POSITION:

Student Unit Record Data System

AccessLex Institute urges Congress to overturn the 2008 ban in the Higher Education Act that prevents the Department of Education from developing a federal student unit record data system. Such a comprehensive higher education data system is essential for stakeholders who need this information to make crucial decisions.

In 2006, the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, in response to the need for more and better information on the quality and cost of higher education, called for the development of "a privacy-protected higher education information system that collects, analyzes and uses student-level data as a vital tool for accountability, policy-making, and consumer choice."¹ However, in the 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, language was inserted that banned the creation of a federal student unit record data system. Some of the stated reasons for opposing a federal student unit record data system are centered on student privacy and data security.

With these concerns in mind, AccessLex Institute, along with many other advocates and policymakers, believe that more and better data are important to assist a variety of stakeholders in making crucial higher education-related decisions. For example, students and their families need better data to help them choose the right college and program that best fits their needs, institutions need current and robust data to serve students effectively, and policymakers need data to inform decisions related to accountability and funding.

A federal student unit record data system could replace the aggregated data that institutions are currently required to report to the federal government through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), leading to more comprehensive, disaggregated data, and a decreased reporting burden on institutions. IPEDS currently collects institution-level data from colleges and universities on enrollment, demographics, and outcomes. However, much of the data collected around costs, financial aid, and outcomes (e.g., graduation rates) currently focus on full-time undergraduate students, severely limiting its usefulness for those interested in graduate and professional students, or non-traditional undergraduate students who attend school part-time. A student unit record data system could collect data on broader categories of individual students.

As the call for more data continues, the reporting burden for many institutions – particularly smaller, less resourced ones – is increasing. A federal student unit record data system could lessen the reporting burden on institutions while also providing more comprehensive data on all students. In addition, as demonstrated by the College Scorecard, student-level data can be matched to other federal databases to track employment outcomes and salaries for students in the system rather than requiring institutions to track down and report on the employment outcomes of their students.

The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act provides an opportunity for Congress to overturn the ban currently in the law that prevents the Department of Education from developing a federal student unit record data system. The data collected and reported through such a comprehensive, robust student-level data system could provide invaluable information to students, institutions, and policymakers that will allow them to compare educational outcomes against workforce outcomes in order to ensure the quality of higher education.

About AccessLex Institute: AccessLex Institute is a nonprofit organization committed to helping talented, purpose-driven students find their path from aspiring lawyer to fulfilled professional. In partnership with its nearly 200 Member law schools, improving access and positively influencing legal education have been at the heart of the Company's mission since 1983. AccessLex Institute has offices in West Chester, Pa., and Washington, D.C., with a team of accredited financial education counselors based throughout the United States. Learn more at AccessLex.org

¹ U.S. Department of Education, A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education, 2006, available at: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/final-report.pdf>